


DIFFERENCE OR AFFINITY? A METHODOLOGICAL ISSUE IN COMPARATIVE STUDIES

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Difference or Affinity? A Methodological Issue in Comparative Studies

In comparative studies, should one lay emphasis on difference or on affinity between the things we bring into comparison? This is a question that not only often gets asked by students, but also has real methodological implications. Things are of course *either* different *or* similar, and very often they are *both* different with distinctive features *and* comparable in certain aspects. The question of difference or affinity is a general one and has been discussed by both Chinese and Western thinkers and scholars past and present. In ancient China, Mencius, for example, believed in the commonality of human nature and the universality of taste—taste in the gastronomic sense and, metaphorically, in an aesthetic sense. He claims that "all palates have the same preference in taste; all ears in sound; all eyes in beauty. Should hearts prove to be an exception by possessing nothing in common? What is common to all hearts? Reason and rightness... Thus reason and rightness please my heart in the same way as meat pleases my palate."[1] With the increasing importance of Mencius since the Tang dynasty (618-907), his emphasis on commonality has a major influence in the Chinese tradition.

In some other ancient Chinese texts, however, we find a different understanding of taste that puts the emphasis on diversity rather than commonality, arguing that it is by blending different ingredients that we get what we appreciate as good taste. A subtle distinction is made between sameness and harmony. For example, in a famous passage from *Zuo zhuan* or *Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (in "the twentieth year of Duke Zhao"), Duke Jing of the State of Qi asked his chief advisor: "Are harmony and sameness different?" "They are indeed different!" replied his advisor by making analogies to food and music: "Harmony is like making a soup: water and fire, vinegar, meat paste, salt, plums are all put together to cook with fish and meat; the cook puts logs on the fire and mixes up the ingredients, adding to what is insufficient and reducing what is excessive." Thus the tasty soup is not just one thing, but the combination of many elements. The same is true of music; it is by combining sounds of different

1. *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau, VI.A.7, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p. 164.

pitch, tempo, and rhythm in harmony that a fine piece of music is composed. "But if one only adds water to water, who would eat that? If lute and zither all produce the same one sound, who would listen to it? So sameness will not do."[2] In another text, *Guo yu* or *Discourses of the States*, we find articulation of a similar idea: "Harmony indeed produces a variety of things, but sameness generates no progeny. . . Therefore we blend five flavors to suit our palate, strengthen the four limbs to protect our body, combine six tunes to please our ears. . . Sounds made one produce no music; things made one display no pattern; flavors made one offer no delicacy; and things made one provide no choice."[3] Here we find a slightly different emphasis from Mencius, but the two arguments are not contradictory to one another; rather, they highlight different aspect of things—either the diversity within unity or unity with diversity.

Among Greek philosophers, Heraclitus has expressed ideas very close to what we have seen above in ancient China, for in fragment 45 he says: "Things taken together are whole and not whole, <something which is> being brought together and brought apart, in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things."[4] Again in fragment 49 we read: "What is opposed brings together; the finest harmony (*harmonia*) is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be in accordance with strife."[5] The idea of a dialectic relationship between unity and diversity becomes an important principle in Western thinking, and it is also prominent in traditional Chinese philosophy. From this we should come to the conclusion that difference and affinity, the specific and the general, the diverse and the universal—all are complementary to one another with emphasis put on one side or the other; so we should not overstress one at the expense of the other. Difference or affinity has no value in and of itself; therefore it is pointless to ask, without a specific context, whether we should lay emphasis on difference or affinity in comparative studies.

In arts and literature, we normally desire a rich variety rather than sameness or uniformity. The Chinese are justly proud of the rich ideas and lively debates in pre-Qin philosophy at the early stage of their history, which they usually describe as "a hundred flowers match in full bloom, and a hundred schools contend to raise their voices." Those different schools of thought indeed constitute a rich source of ideas influential in the Chinese tradition, and it is futile to force them into a unified orthodoxy. The First Emperor of Qin in the third century B. C. E. tried to burn books and to bury scholars alive in his drastic effort to control people's minds, but he only succeeded in locking

2. *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* [*The Correct Meaning of Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*], in Ruan Yuan (1764-1849) (ed.), *Shisan jing zhushu* [*The Thirteen Classics with Annotations*], 2 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980, 2, p. 2093-2094.
3. Fu Gengsheng (ed.), *Guo yu xuan* [*Selections from Discourses of the States*], Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1959, p. 212-213.
4. Heraclitus, fragment 45, *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, ed. Patricia Curd, trans. Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996, p. 34.
5. *Ibid.*, fragment 49, p. 35.

himself in the pillory of history, winning the notoriety of a prototypical tyrant despised by all later generations. So we indeed appreciate diversity and difference in arts and literature, and in those studies where the purpose is to define or distinguish an object from other objects, emphasis on difference or the specific distinctiveness becomes the legitimate concern. "Determination is negation," as Spinoza puts it.[6] On the level of textual details, we may say that every work of literature is unique—each poem, each novel or play is different from any other. And yet, uniqueness is only relative and not absolute, for no work of literature is so different as to deny itself the possibility of comparison with other works. After all, the literary language itself is not different from our normal, daily language, and it is only the writer's skillful use of the language that makes all the difference. As Oscar Wilde puts it, "the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium."[7] A truly unique, private language would become unintelligible and thus defeats the very purpose of literary expression and communication. Poems, novels, and plays can be seen to constitute a certain form and tradition with common features when we look at them from the point of view of literary genres, treat them as parts of literature as a whole, and study them as exemplary works in the history of literature. It is precisely the commonality of shared features of different literary works that lays the very foundation of comparative literature as a discipline.

The ground for comparison, however, is more specifically concerned with the commonality or comparability of different literary traditions and is often debatable. It becomes an even more challenging problem when comparative literature develops beyond the European or Euro-American boundaries. In China and the West, we often encounter an argument that insists on the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western literatures and cultures. In the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the so-called Chinese rites controversy flared up in the Vatican to condemn the Jesuit "accommodation approach," which, according to the doctrinaire purists, gave too much concession to the Chinese and their pagan culture and language. The use of *tianzu* or *shangdi* as Chinese equivalents to the Christian God or Lord was officially condemned by popes from Clement XI in 1704 to Benedict XIV in 1742; the Catholic Church reassured the spiritual uniqueness and the fundamental difference between Christianity and the pagan Chinese culture, and the idea of untranslatability became not just a linguistic, but a conceptual issue that has cast a long shadow on later discussions of East-West cross-cultural understanding. Now differences are obvious between China and the West in many ways—in language, culture, history, social customs, political institutions, and so on. No one can overlook those differences and claim an unproblematic universality between the East and the West. Those who insist

6. Benedict de Spinoza, *Correspondence*, in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, 2 vols., New York: Dover Publications, 1951, 2, p. 370.
7. Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, revised ed., eds. Richard Aldington and Stanley Weintraub, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, p. 138.

on fundamental differences, however, are not concerned with such obvious and concrete differences, but they argue for difference on a more conceptual or philosophical level, the radical incommensurability of the modes of thinking, and therefore the impossibility of East-West comparative literature or cross-cultural studies. Some have argued, for example, that Chinese-Western comparative literature is "essentially a *utopian* project," that is, a sort of pure fantasy, an imaginary endeavor "inscribed" in an "impossible disciplinary space."[8] Some of the most commonly held dichotomous views include such clear-cut oppositions: a Chinese synthetic mode of thinking versus a Western analytic mode of thinking, Chinese emphasis on collectivity versus Western predilection for individualism, Chinese harmonious relationship with nature versus Western conquest of nature and its dire consequences of pollution and the destruction of the world's ecological system, etc. Not just Westerners who hold such views, but some Chinese as well, for whom such simplistic dichotomies may serve to strengthen the stereotypes they have of the West and blame the West for all the environmental issues and other problems we face in the world today.

Jonathan Spence once remarked that to set up "mutually reinforcing images and perceptions" of an exotic China "seems to have been a particularly French genius."[9] Although Spence's description of the "French exotic" is by no means applicable just to the French, it is true that quite a few French Sinophiles and Sinologues seem to have a particular predilection for a kind of Chinese exoticism. Victor Segalen is probably the first to theorize the charm of an exotic China in a series of notes for a pamphlet in the early twentieth century, but he was more concerned with the poetic possibilities of cultural difference, the aesthetic appeal of the exotic or what he called "*l'esthétique du divers*,"[10] while some French scholars in our time are more determined to conceptualize China as the opposite of Europe and thereby to set up a more absolute dichotomy between the East and the West. For example, in his study of the Chinese rites controversy, Jacques Gernet imputed the failure of the Christian mission in China to the fundamental difference "*non seulement d'autres traditions intellectuelles, mais d'autres catégories mentales et d'autres modes de pensée*."[11] The fundamental difference between a Chinese *mentalité* and its European counterpart is often illustrated by the contrast between Greek abstract thinking and the lack thereof in China, and it is often the conclusion of such contrastive studies to present China as the opposite to Greece. Thus Gernet claims that Chinese has no grammatical categories that European languages possess. "*Le chinois n'avait pas non plus de*

8. David Palumbo-Liu, "The Utopias of Discourse: On the Impossibility of Chinese Comparative Literature," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 14 (1992), p. 165.
9. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1998, p. 145.
10. See Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme: une esthétique du divers*, Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978.
11. Jacques Gernet, *Chine et Christianisme: Action et réaction*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1982, p. 12.

verbe d'existence, rien qui permette de traduire cette notion d'être ou d'essence qu'expriment si commodément en grec le substantif ousia *ou le neutre* to on*. Aussi bien, la notion d'être en tant que réalité stable et éternelle, au-delà du phénoménal, est-elle inconnue en Chine*."[12] This is a general conclusion not only of the untranslatability of particular Western words or terms into Chinese, but one that evaluates the nature and quality of the entire Chinese language, and also of the capabilities of the Chinese "mode of thinking."

Another prolific scholar, François Jullien, goes even further in setting up the dichotomies between ancient China and ancient Greece. In his many books and articles, Jullien has reiterated the same point repeatedly, namely that China, among all ancient civilizations, is the only one that had no contact with Greece and therefore could provide a negative mirror for the West to look for what it is not. "*De fait, si l'on veut 'dépasser le cadre grec', et si l'on cherche alors un appui et une perspective appropriés,*" says Jullien, "*je ne vois pas d'autre voyage possible qu''à la Chine', comme on disait jadis. C'est, en effet, la seule civilisation qui se soit donnée dans des textes consistants, et dont la généalogie linguistique et historique soit radicalement non européenne. . . . Or, à strictement parler, la* non-Europe*, c'est la Chine, et cela ne peut être rien d'autre.*"[13] The West may achieve self-understanding by looking at China as the opposite—that is the point Jullien repeatedly makes in one argument after another. Of course, it is perfectly all right for a Western scholar to use China for self-understanding and for thinking from the outside, but the problem with Jullien's argument is that it becomes utterly predictable as his study is always already predetermined to find differences between China and Greece, and he always finds them one way or another. In one of his earlier works, *La valeur allusive*, Jullien criticized the Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) for making China and Europe "*plus ou moins pareil[les].*"[14] That is a gross simplification, however, because Qian Zhongshu never simply proclaims that something Chinese is similar or equivalent to something European, but his argument always starts with a particular textual detail, typically a quotation from an ancient Chinese classic, and proceeds with quotations from various other sources, supplemented with his own commentaries to bring all the textual evidences together for an insight, an elucidation, or a major critical point. Qian's text is characteristically a dense web of quotations from texts in Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, or Latin, in which brilliant ideas are always well connected with one another to demonstrate the affinities, or sometimes crucial differences, of cultures and traditions East and West. Without the same kind of textual structure, convincing evidences, and persuasive argument, it is hardly possible to take Jullien's contrastive claims seriously, because simply

12. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
13. François Jullien et Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d'un Dehors (La Chine): Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000, p. 39.
14. François Jullien, *La valeur allusive: Des catégories originales de l'interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise (Contribution à une réflexion sur l'altérité interculturelle)*, Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1985, no. 1, p. 126.

to declare that all things East and West are "*plus ou moins différent[s]*" can hardly be regarded as serious scholarship.

Alluding to a famous phrase originally from Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1193), a neo-Confucian philosopher of the Song dynasty, Qian Zhongshu argues that "from the Eastern sea to the Western sea, people's hearts and minds are the same; in the teachings of the South and the North, the way and the means are not separate."[15] This is an argument to justify East-West comparative studies on the basis of the basic affinities between the East and the West, but the argument is always substantiated by a rich intertextuality of ideas in different languages and cultural traditions. Qian's works have set the best example for comparative studies in China, for he is arguably the most erudite scholar in modern China with deep understanding of both the classical Chinese tradition and several Western languages and cultures. "*Sa connaissance de la littérature chinoise, du patrimoine occidental, de la littérature universelle,*" as Simon Leys puts it, "*est prodigieuse. Qian Zhongshu n'a pas son pareil aujourd'hui en Chine et même dans le monde*."[16] In his major works written in elegant classical Chinese, *Tan yi lu* [*Discourses on the Art of Literature*] and *Guan zhui bian* [*Pipe-Awl Chapters*], Qian has brilliantly demonstrated the fundamental affinities between the East and the West in both ideas and expressions. His emphasis on affinities has its long intellectual genealogy in China from Mencius to neo-Confucian philosophers like Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming (1472-1529), but more significantly it is also a reaction against the kind of Eurocentrism that sets up an absolute dichotomy between China and the West, seeing China as the inferior opposite to Europe. At the beginning of *Guan zhui bian*, for example, Qian Zhongshu identifies a number of Chinese terms and concepts that contain several meanings, some of which are contradictory to one another. For example, the Chinese character *yi* means first "simple," second, "change," and third, "not change," which contradicts the second meaning. The contradictory bisemy of words is not uncommon, but Hegel thought only the German language was capable of dialectic philosophizing, as represented by the famous term "*Aufhebung*," while he put down Chinese as an underdeveloped language incapable of such dialectics. By discussing the term *yi* and a number of other Chinese terms with different and contradictory meanings, Qian criticizes Hegel's Eurocentric denial of comparability. "We do not have to blame him for not knowing the Chinese language; and we do not have to feel surprised that he should be so careless as to make such high-sounding arguments without knowing the language, for that was not uncommon with those who thought themselves as learned masters and authorities. But," says Qian, "all those who are serious about learning must feel sorry for him to have made what is common in the East and the West as though they were completely incompatible."[17] It is by exposing the false

15. Qian Zhongshu, *Tan yi lu* [*Discourses on the Art of Literature*], enlarged ed., Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986, p. 1.
16. Simon Leys, *Le Monde*, 10 juin 1983.
17. Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian* [*Pipe-Awl Chapters*], 2nd ed., Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986, p. 2.

dichotomy that Qian laid the foundation of East-West comparative studies, but because his major scholarly works are written in an elegant but difficult language of classical Chinese, his works remain largely unknown in the West.[18] This is a treasure yet to be fully explored for better understanding of the differences and affinities between the literary and cultural traditions East and West, a treasure of ideas and insights that are extremely important for students of comparative literature and culture.

Finally, let me return to the initial question of difference and affinity and reiterate my argument: it is pointless to ask whether we should put emphasis on difference or on affinity in comparative studies without considering the context within which we conduct our study. The meaning and value of difference or affinity emerge only in a particular context or situation, in answering specific questions with concrete argument and textual evidences. Affinity does not mean sameness without diversity, and difference does not mean incommensurability that denies the very possibility of comparison. And that, I would argue, should be the basis of comparative literature as a field of study and a worthy discipline in the humanities.

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18. In English, however, there is a translation of selected passages from Qian's magna opus, *Guan zhui bian*; see Qian Zhongshu, *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*, selected and translated by Ronald Egan, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998. See also my own essay, "Qian Zhongshu on the Philosophical and Mystical Paradoxes in the *Laozi*," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, eds. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip Ivanhoe, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, p. 97-126.